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IN RETROSPECT: VIEWS ON THE RAND

VIET CONG INTERVIEW PROJECT

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IN RETROSPECT: VIEWS ON THE
RAND VIET CONG INTERVIEW PROJECT

The following are some thoughts about the RAND Viet Cong interview project -- as it has been conducted and as it might have been conducted. They are based on two years of involvement with the project resulting in four major writing endeavors. The impetus to record my insights here is my strong feeling that the interviews themselves have been (and are) an extremely worthwhile investment, but that in the resulting analyses we have not always utilized them in the best possible manner. Some of the problems connected with survey research in a "hostile" environment such as South Vietnam are unavoidable; others could have been more successfully avoided and dealt with at the outset. Most importantly, some types of questions, particularly those broader ones concerning the state of Viet Cong morale and its implications for U.S. policy, should have been avoided since the interview data could never hope to provide any complete picture. This does not mean that studies concerning Viet Cong perceptions and attitudes and the factors influencing motivation and morale should not have been undertaken. The particular questions asked should simply have been more clearly defined

and limited to those answerable within the confines of the interview (and supplementary) data. Exactly what these questions and confines are deserves further study and discussion within RAND at this time. In this paper I have merely tried to outline a few of my thoughts and feelings on the project as a whole. Most of these are neither new nor original -- they constitute my own "lessons learned" derived from hard labor, frequent periods of frustration, and from the written and verbal debate permeating RAND corridors and conference rooms for the past two years.*

*The following are good written summaries of some of the methodological problems associated with the VC interview project: D-15624, "A Technical Note on Bias in the RAND Interviews," by Frank Denton; D-15656, "Samples Quota Samples, and the VC Study" by Tony Russo; D-15172, "Some Views on Interviews," and D-17060, "A Possible Bias in the Coded VC Interview Data," by Ralph Strauch.

A. Research and Interview Design

A maxim for survey research might be: "Choose a research question answerable by a questionnaire; design the questionnaire to answer the question." The RAND experience has shown that different analysts are interested in different types of questions, or their areas of interest have changed over time, and that the same type of interview cannot possibly serve these dissimilar purposes. The same questionnaire did serve all concerned for some time in the VC project, and the result was to make some kinds of analysis impossible or more difficult than they need have been, and the implications of others misleading. Furthermore, much energy was subsequently wasted on internal debate on the "proper" way to proceed.

The fact is that different types of research questions based on interview data require different kinds of questionnaires, and each set has its own particular and inherent "survey research" problems. Resources and mandate permitting, it is my opinion that such diversity in approach and subject matter is probably a good thing within RAND. But it is imperative to make explicit plans for this -- which is another way of saying that the interviews themselves should be so designed to fit the

needs and capabilities of the individual researcher at any particular point in time, or else the focus of the study should remain constant. If diversity prevails, the process of research planning for each analyst should incorporate the following five rather obvious (or at least simple) steps:

- a. Persons unilaterally or in concert with others make a decision as to particular research interests and topics within the (hopefully broad) confines of the "contract."
- b. The question be asked: whether interviews can provide adequate data and what kinds of problems inherent in the data might subsequently shape or limit the analysis.
- c. A questionnaire be designed, preferably by a group of analysts or with other help, best suited to the objectives of the particular study. (This is discussed below.)
- d. A code simultaneously be designed which is keyed to the content of the particular questionnaire. (Discussed below.)
- e. Plans be made for: where (what geographical sections of South Vietnam) the analyst wants the interviews derived from; who are the preferred subjects (what types of VC); and hopefully how many interviews over what time period are desired or needed.

Obviously, this process will require not only a clear sense of objectives but also a little program budgeting within the RAND project. Furthermore, each analyst will have to be aware of what his colleagues are doing, how

his own study fits in, and what resource constraints will be imposed on him -- worthy objectives in themselves.

As a matter of history, the concept of individually focused research and interview design was not officially considered by the VC interview project personnel until the project's later stages (what Gus Shubert calls the "third" or Bill Jones' stage), at which time the project appeared largely crippled by the preceding internal debate. Exclusive concentration on the rather loose and lengthy open-ended questionnaire (the Zaslov and later AG or Gouré form) thus had continued past the useful stage of providing us with a picture of the Viet Cong and aiding in topic formulation because of: (a) the existence of a client with fluctuating interests (shifting back and forth from a military and political focus on the VC); and (b) inertia and the lack of a strong sense of internal (RAND) purpose. And then, of course, some (myself included) argued that concentration on focused "short-term" interviews might create difficulties in deciding what to study in the first place, commit the analyst on something he might subsequently discover uninteresting or unimportant, foreclose the possibility of discovering significant bits of unsuspected information and, most

importantly, eliminate continuity over time in the range and types of questions asked of insurgent members. The latter factors in particular I considered RAND's comparative advantage in the area of insurgency research. In retrospect, however, it appears that the fourth argument was not well thought through because the unhomogeneous nature of the interview sample and loose structure of the questionnaire itself eliminated the possibility of doing much productive "time trend" work, and enough food for thought for "posterity" was generated anyway without the continuation of the same lengthy interview form over several years. Perhaps we could have had the best of both worlds. The problems of finding interesting or "significant" topics to study for some analysts might have been overcome by the continued conduction of several in-depth, open-ended discussions with VC cadres per month by our best interviewers, and by wider circulation and absorption of external sources. And while the major concentration of resources after a certain point should have been on individually focused and short-term interviews and studies, some important "insurgency" questions (such as why men join or stop fighting) might have been held constant.

B. Types and Levels of Analysis

The following are examples of different types of RAND research on the Viet Cong and the kind of interview form they utilized (or might best utilize in the future). First there is the mainly descriptive analysis of the insurgency system -- the organization, personnel, operating procedures and tactics, strategic concepts. This kind of analysis requires an in-depth and open-ended questionnaire allowing the interviewees to talk at length on the subjects about which they are particularly knowledgeable within the area of the analyst's interests. It is, of course, the type of interview in which RAND has developed decided excellence and maintains a comparative advantage. Since neither statistical data nor inferences are part of the analysis, the interview sample itself need not be large nor the sample procedures rigorous. In general, the more information the better. Care should be exercised to obtain subjects of all hierarchical levels and geographical areas (if this is the study's focus), but even this is not a strict requirement if interview data is used in correlation with other sources of information which can fill in the gaps.

Examples of this type of writing using in-depth interviews in correlation with Viet Cong captured

documents are W. P. Davison's RM-5267 appropriately named Some Observations on Viet Cong Operations in the Villages and my own "Economic Strategies and Activities of the Viet Cong" (D-15089). Parts of the earliest VC motivation studies by Leon Gouré and Konrad Kellen's A Profile of the PAVN Soldier in South Vietnam: A Psywar Oriented Study (RM-5013) have offered useful descriptive insights into the different types of Viet Cong members and "what makes them tick" by similar use of in-depth and flexible questionnaires. Because of the importance of discussing the Viet Cong within the context of their particular operational environment and experiences, however, some of the best studies have concentrated on selected geographical areas. The VC interview project in Dinh Tuong province yielded one such excellent project RM-5114, A Look at the Viet Cong Cadres in Dinh Tuong Province, 1965, 1966, by D. Elliott and C. A. H. Thomson. The M. Anderson, M. Arnsten and H. Averch RM-5239 on Insurgent Organization and Operations: A Case Study of the Viet Cong in the Delta, 1964-1966 is also geographically defined.

Studies of current enemy morale and attitudes should be limited in terms of time, place, and policy implications, with the analyst's assumptions concerning the relationship of the particular study to other questions made explicit in the writing. A research product is probably vulnerable to being considered misleading or inaccurate from the beginning if it purports to study the "effects" of B-52 strikes or herbicide from a scattered non-random sample of VC interviewees, some of whom had not experienced B-52 strikes or were not even asked about herbicides. Examination of changes in the impact of these over time are even more vulnerable, and rightly so. In view of the problems of sample size, sampling procedures, interview reliability and the relevance of many variables to any interviewee's answers,* studies of factors influencing VC morale would best employ a standard (fixed) interview form among subjects of the same combat unit or geographical areas during the same time period.

* A check-list of such variables influencing any member's perception of events or other forms of "bias" include: detention status; rank and function and length of service in VC; personal experiences in VC; reason for joining and previous likes and dislikes in VC; and contact with US/GVN.

Although not based on this kind of questionnaire, Mel Gurtov's RM-5353, The War in the Delta: View from Three Viet Cong Battalions, highlights the usefulness of an examination of Viet Cong perceptions within limited space and time. My own D-16395 entitled "The Viet Cong and the People: A Case Study in VC-Villager Relationships" also examines the Viet Cong attitudes and behavior in villages of four provinces during a one-year period, and uses captured documents from the same area extensively to provide a description of the higher echelon reactions and policy response to particular events.

Finally, given the sensitivity and significance of the subject matter -- enemy morale -- to government policy formation and the frequent tendency of clients to misinterpret (or over-interpret) limited and sometimes "academic" studies, research on morale would benefit greatly by the author's attempt to put forth in writing his own assumptions or opinions either concerning the relationship of the particular findings to the broader context of the Viet Cong system or the war events. This means not only an attempt to relate the study to the real world happenings in Vietnam (VC and US/GVN plans and operations within specific areas over a specific time

period). It also means an attempt, however limited, to relate attitudinal studies to the Viet Cong system as a whole and to modes of individual behavior -- in other words, such questions as how the Viet Cong hierarchy recognizes and deals with any "demoralization" in its ranks, and how morale does (or does not) affect individual or unit combat effectiveness, defection, and so forth. Our general knowledge of these matters is great, but has too often been kept to ourselves.

If the analyst's subject is why men join, why men keep fighting, or why men defect, he would best use a short objective, closed questionnaire administered to a large number of persons and, if desired, over wide geographical areas. Frank Denton's questionnaire concerning reasons for joining the VC, which records the interviewee's answers by checking appropriate blanks, is the only one of this type. Clearly the sampling procedure can never be a random one, given the Vietnam environment. The interview sample will be necessarily biased toward prisoners and defectors to begin with, since persons who did not join the VC, did not defect, or were not captured are not interviewed. And even within the subpopulation of prisoners

and defectors other factors, such as security, make selection non-random. But, as many "friendly" critics of the RAND VC interview project have pointed out, there is nothing holy about random samples or about the resulting statistical inferences and projections. With a little forethought and administrative planning, significant attempts could be made to control the sampling procedure with a view toward recognizing and isolating interviewee biases. A "judgment" sampling technique which Tony Russo (or his academic predecessor) call "quota sampling,"* for example, attempts to stratify the Viet Cong population into subcategories according to certain variables which, in the analyst's judgment, might influence any interviewee's perceptions and response. Such variables might include rank in VC, force status, length of service, detention status, home area, geographical area of operation, type of experience in VC, and so forth. After the stratification procedure, the analyst assigns quotas (or number of interviews desired) to each stratum and then, by multiplication,

* See Tony Russo's D-15616, "Samples, Quota Samples, and the VC Study" (May 5, 1967), for a description of this technique.

arrives at the desired total sample size. This would, seemingly, allow the analyst to use the resulting data with greater confidence in hypothesis formulation and refutation.

C. Objective Tools: Codes and Computers

It has often been stated that one can find anything (and everything) one wants in the VC interviews -- with the implication being that the interviews as a whole are therefore worth little or, considered individually, unreliable sources of information. In my opinion the diversity of interviewee description is more accurately a reflection of the different types of Viet Cong members,* the variety of kinds of experience in the Viet Cong, and, of course, the range of questions asked. For speed and ease of analysis and to mitigate the effects of what may be termed an analyst's "interest bias" (which may result from an emotional or ideological bias), it is therefore imperative for the analyst to face the full complexity and depth of each interview with a code for recording information in his hand, a code which is specifically keyed to the content of the questionnaire itself. There is really no other way for the analyst to handle the wealth of information in a

* Obviously -- volunteers vs. draftees, Party members vs. civilian laborers, cadres vs. rank and file, regroupees vs. the recent recruits, hamlet officials vs. province committee members. The Viet Cong's internal security system serves to further isolate members from one another.

reliable and judicious fashion and, in some cases, no other way to formulate (or reformulate) hypotheses. Not only will different aspects of the interviewees' descriptions appear interesting or significant to different analysts; but the same two persons may view, remember, or forget the same information differently or at different rates. Furthermore, it is almost impossible for any one person to remember the context^{*} of any one interviewee's reply in forming his own "impressions" of the data as a whole. And after reading a large number of interviews, it also becomes impossible to remember the amount of evidence on a particular subject -- the number of times one or another "noteworthy aspect" actually did appear in the whole batch of interviews.

The analyst thus must have the aid at all times of more objective mechanical devices for condensing, recording and storing data from the interviews -- a code and computer. I suggest that the code for each specific questionnaire be written before the interview is put in

* For example, the time frame, the type of VC member speaking, his area of operation, his experience as a VC and in a POW or Chieu Hoi camp, the factors influencing or offsetting the events he describes, whether what he reports are his own observations or hearsay, and so forth.

in the field and, like the questionnaire itself, be written by more than one person. This latter point is important because, as I found in trying to write a code for 450 interviews conducted in Saigon in the 1968 post-Tet period, it is difficult for one person to acknowledge all the variables which might influence each interviewee's response and to link them in a fashion easily retrievable by a computer programmer and subsequently useful to the analyst. Codes can obviously be added to, but it is a more painful process to try to change them at a future time! While the analyst may want a research assistant to do much of the actual coding, I suggest he train himself first, subsequently compare his results with those of his research assistant, and at all times use at least an abbreviated code or checklist while reading the interviews. In addition, it would be extremely valuable to record in the code his own observations and impressions of the reliability of each interviewee's response -- the amount and types of suspected bias, misinformation, or internal inconsistencies.

D. Sub-Optimization: Other Data Sources and Other Questions

Some of the RAND Viet Cong analysts might have benefited by utilization of external data sources along with the VC interviews which served either to (a) increase the size of the sample; (b) add to the amount of information on any particular subject; (c) confirm, deny, or qualify the information and hypotheses arising from the interviews; (d) broaden the topic under discussion (from a village to the district or province, from a battalion to a regiment); (e) or place the topic in the context of VC or US/GVN activities and the course of the war in various geographical areas and points of time. Although I will not attempt to describe these sources here, such a list might include VC incident and order of battle records; data on the US/GVN operations; Joe Carrier's Chieu Hoi data; VC prisoner records and official interrogation reports; and VC captured documents.

My own area of experience is with the captured documents. Even though it is an awesome (and awful) task to attempt to decipher relevant documents for place data of origin and authorized receiver -- to say nothing of largely irrelevant material in the first place -- this can be done. The documents do have their own sample and

"reliability" problems. But their concurrent use with the interviews not only allows maximum use of the information from any one source, but also permits certain types of case studies to be undertaken. The interviews, for example, can describe events in limited localities and the captured documents can reveal the Party hierarchy's reactions and response to these; and, vice versa, the captured documents can state broadly (or rhetorically) tactics scheduled for a particular area and the interviews might reveal whether and how these policies were implemented, and with what effect. Thus the captured documents place the descriptions of the VC operational system and personnel at the hamlet or platoon level within the context of the larger organization and its broader planning. In addition, to the Anderson, Arnsten and Averch study and my own province case study cited earlier, Dave Elliott's recent case history of "Pacification and the Viet Cong System in Dinh Tuong: 1966-1967" (D-17077) demonstrates the usefulness of examining different data sources simultaneously and in conjunction with one another. Frank Denton and Tony Russo have also used external data, namely data on U.S. air sortie and herbicide operations, in their work.

The use of external data sources would have allowed RAND to lend its Viet Cong expertise to a range of interesting and important (and apparently neglected) questions. Most notably, these include: studies of the kinds and amount of interaction between the lower-level operational echelons and the higher level policy-making echelons; analysis of the relationship between lower-level members' descriptions and perceptions of events and higher-level perceptions and planning; and an examination of what Hanoi considers major indicators of Viet Cong success, failure, strengths and vulnerabilities in South Vietnam at particular points in time.

E. Some Avoidable and Unavoidable Problems

The problem of interview reliability, including such questions as interviewee biases, the giving of false information, misinformation or inexact information, clearly exist and deserve more study with RAND at this time. But they will be (and have been) varied for each analyst depending on his subject matter and the type of questionnaire utilized. Significantly, many of these can be effectively dealt with by recognition and "after-the-fact" manipulation of the data. Some specific steps (short of lie detector tests) which might have been taken at the outset to increase interview reliability and, just as important, to aid the analyst in interpretation of the biases and information given, include the following. Many of these have been previously suggested by other RAND staff members.

- a. First and foremost, greater concern to the science of questionnaire design to avoid the problem of "leading" the interviewees or forcing them to form opinions "on the spot" while, at the same time, obtaining answers to specific questions. For example, some rules of thumb for future reference might be to ask the general open-ended question before the specific question, to ask more "behavior" questions (what the subject did), and to place "attitude" questions in a time framework (when the subject felt such and such a way). On the subject of interview design I would like to contribute much more, as I imagine would others of those working on the project. This might be a useful RAND study.

- b. Greater use of the interview data as a whole (and perhaps correlated with external sources) to attempt to discover, compare and control for various types of biases (for example, prisoner vs. rallier, I Corps vs. IV Corps).
- c. Requestioning of interviewees on points of apparent inconsistency or suspected misinformation (later in the interview or at a subsequent time).
- d. Use of complete interview transcripts by the analyst (either in written form or by use of interview tapes) rather than the summaries of the answers as presently done.
- e. Minimization of editing of the interview translations.

* * * * *

In summary, some of the problems associated with research based on interview data may have been unavoidable in the Viet Cong project. Given what I consider the high quality of the RAND interviews themselves, it seems that our largest "mistake" was in the lack of clear objectives and administrative planning and, thus, our frequent misuse of the wealth of information available to use in the interviews. This might have been overcome by several rather simple processes: recognition of the problems in this kind of survey research and subsequent limitation of the types of studies undertaken; use of different types of questionnaires to support different kinds of studies

(if such diversity is desired); greater use of mechanical aids to record, store, and retrieve data; concurrent use of other data sources; an effort by each analyst to describe in writing his research objectives and techniques, his major assumptions and hypotheses underlying or flowing from the data at various points in time, and the conclusions derived from the data as compared to those which are his expert opinion or subjective impression. Perhaps the greatest consequence of the internal debate within RAND over the project's direction, control, and proper methodology was not only that what were legitimately "different" objectives and approaches tended to polarize, but that the environment itself limited the recording of what was an analyst's honest opinion and evaluation of particular problems -- either those inherent in his work or the Vietnam situation as a whole. As I stated previously, many of our opinions about the Viet Cong system seem indeed to be "expert," wise, and valuable ones. Only they were so rarely ever stated in any of our writing.

In retrospect, perhaps the largest single problem (or "failure," as some would claim) of the RAND Viet Cong Motivation and Morale project was not what was actually studied, but the manner in which the discussion of what to

study and how to study it was carried out. At several times the internal RAND environment seemed, sadly, a reflection of the Vietnamese society -- a bureaucratic guerrilla war. At other times it seemed a microcosm of American society and its debate over the war -- a debate beclouded by emotional reaction and counterreaction. In other words, it often was not a debate among intelligent, objective, and concerned analysts who, while working under real time pressures, sought to maintain their time perspective on the Vietnam war. Clearly this is the manner in which RAND (of all places!) should deal with the larger issues of international policy as well as on the course and contours of its own work. There should have been, and there should be now, much more calm, analytical, and focused discussion of the value and limitations of the VC Motivation and Morale project over the last four years, and an effort should be made to extract the salient institutional as well as individual lessons learned. I hope this paper is a small contribution.